

China... from the Sea: The Importance of Chinese Naval History

Strategic Insights, Volume VI, Issue 6 (December 2007)

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Strategic Insights is a bi-monthly electronic journal produced by the Center for Contemporary Conflict at the Naval Postgraduate School in Monterey, California. The views expressed here are those of the author(s) and do not necessarily represent the views of NPS, the Department of Defense, or the U.S. Government.

Introduction

Since the fall of the Soviet Union, China has become a source of increased focus for military strategists and policy-makers throughout the West and most especially in the United States. With the largest army in the world and obvious aspirations to, at the very least, regional power they mark one of the most significant potential threats to American military supremacy. Studies of China's martial past have been included in the professional reading of many officers in the United States Armed forces. However, there is still one common misperception with regard to China's military history. China, despite what many have written, has an important naval heritage. This heritage may not have been central to the study of Chinese history in the past; however it is important for study in the future. The Chinese government itself has included examples from this history as inspiration for their modern policy and strategy. With this fact in mind it is of vital importance that historians and strategists understand China's naval past.

China has long been regarded as a country of little naval history. The highly regarded Sinologist John King Fairbank commented that naval matters were "foreign to Chinese ways."^[1] For the past century most military historians have reasoned that since China's primary threats came from the nomadic steppe peoples of Central Asia, there was no reason to develop sea power. In 1948 the historian F.B. Elridge wrote that "essentially a land people, the Chinese cannot be considered as having possessed sea-power."^[2] Such statements turn out to be simply false, once the history of China is studied in search of examples of naval and maritime history. According to Peter Lorge, in his article "Water Forces and Naval Operations" from the book *A Military History of China*, "Naval warfare and operations were crucial to the creation and unification of the Chinese Empire for over two thousand years."^[3]

Naval history in China begins in parallel to the experiences of Europe. The first Chinese documents that include a specific mention of ships used in military operations can be found in histories covering events as early as 1045 BC. The first example of shipbuilding dedicated to naval warfare come from the Spring and Autumn Period (722-481 BC).^[4] These, while not exact mirrors of European history, put development along similar early lines. Just as in Europe, as iron tools improved so did Chinese shipbuilding. Multi-decked vessels with rams in the bow, armed with boarding troops and missile weapons, served the navies of China's Spring and Autumn period just as they served the Mediterranean powers of the same time period. The Song Dynasty's naval programs, starting in 960 AD, led the Chinese to outpace the Europeans and introduced revolutionary developments in naval science. The Song included early gunpowder weapons as a part of their naval armament and developed the world's first compass, variable

Report Documentation Page				Form Approved OMB No. 0704-0188	
Public reporting burden for the collection of information is estimated to average 1 hour per response, including the time for reviewing instructions, searching existing data sources, gathering and maintaining the data needed, and completing and reviewing the collection of information. Send comments regarding this burden estimate or any other aspect of this collection of information, including suggestions for reducing this burden, to Washington Headquarters Services, Directorate for Information Operations and Reports, 1215 Jefferson Davis Highway, Suite 1204, Arlington VA 22202-4302. Respondents should be aware that notwithstanding any other provision of law, no person shall be subject to a penalty for failing to comply with a collection of information if it does not display a currently valid OMB control number.					
1. REPORT DATE DEC 2007		2. REPORT TYPE		3. DATES COVERED 00-00-2007 to 00-00-2007	
4. TITLE AND SUBTITLE China... from the Sea: The Importance of Chinese Naval History				5a. CONTRACT NUMBER	
				5b. GRANT NUMBER	
				5c. PROGRAM ELEMENT NUMBER	
6. AUTHOR(S)				5d. PROJECT NUMBER	
				5e. TASK NUMBER	
				5f. WORK UNIT NUMBER	
7. PERFORMING ORGANIZATION NAME(S) AND ADDRESS(ES) Naval Postgraduate School,Center for Contemporary Conflict,1 University Circle,Monterey,CA,93943				8. PERFORMING ORGANIZATION REPORT NUMBER	
9. SPONSORING/MONITORING AGENCY NAME(S) AND ADDRESS(ES)				10. SPONSOR/MONITOR'S ACRONYM(S)	
				11. SPONSOR/MONITOR'S REPORT NUMBER(S)	
12. DISTRIBUTION/AVAILABILITY STATEMENT Approved for public release; distribution unlimited					
13. SUPPLEMENTARY NOTES					
14. ABSTRACT					
15. SUBJECT TERMS					
16. SECURITY CLASSIFICATION OF:			17. LIMITATION OF ABSTRACT Same as Report (SAR)	18. NUMBER OF PAGES 9	19a. NAME OF RESPONSIBLE PERSON
a. REPORT unclassified	b. ABSTRACT unclassified	c. THIS PAGE unclassified			

depth rudders for operating in the shallows, and naval architecture based on water-tight bulkheads.^[5]

With the above naval history available for study why do so many historians label the Chinese as people without a maritime past? There are numerous possible and plausible explanations. A logical starting point is the obvious failing of Chinese naval forces when they first faced Western navies in the nineteenth century. Politics likely played a role as well. Throughout history China's scholar bureaucrats were responsible for recording history and they were predisposed against military and naval leaders who were their main rivals for power. A third reason might be the operational environment in which many Chinese naval battles took place. Engagements in the rivers, bays, and coastal waters of China do not fit in the traditional and Mahanian definitions of a proper sea battle. However, disregarding these operations is the same as claiming that the 1813 victory of Master Commandant Perry on Lake Erie, and the Battle of Hampton Roads in 1862 have little significance to American naval heritage since they occurred on a lake and a river.

Warfare in the Littoral

Pre-modern Chinese naval power was centered closer to home than what developed in Europe and did not focus as much on sea going capabilities. China historian Peter Lorge wrote that in China "naval operations encompass a much greater range of activities than ship-to-ship combat."^[6] These other operations, he tells us, include river crossings, defense of bridges, transport of invasion forces, riverine and canal patrols, and battles on China's numerous and large lakes. For ten centuries, starting with the rise of the Song Dynasty in the tenth century, naval forces played a decisive role in the transfer of power between Chinese dynasties until the domination of the Qing by Western forces.

The Song, in their defense against the nomadic cavalry of the steppe, fell back on naval superiority time and time again to preserve the dynasty. During the wars between the Song and the Liao at the close of the tenth century the Song built an elaborate system of hydraulic defenses. This system of rivers and canals patrolled by naval units provided a unique defense against the cavalry based warfare of the Liao. Historian Jung-Pang Lo tells us that in the early Song period there were many "navies composed of river units under provincial command."^[7]

The hydraulic defenses in the Hebei region (in the area around modern Beijing) were eventually overcome by the Jurchen and as the Song capital at Kaifeng fell in 1127 the Song were forced to retreat south. Lorge wrote in *War, Politics, and Society in Early Modern China* that "Southern China was also much less favorable for cavalry than northern China, and the Jurchen had to cross not only numerous small rivers and canals but also the Huai and Yangzi rivers."^[8] As a result of the new geography naval patrols by riverine forces became central to the Chinese defenses. The Jurchen established the Jin dynasty in the north but the Southern Song remained strong against their attacks due primarily to the naval power of their mobile and powerful inland fleets.

During the invasion launched by the Jin in the 1160s the lack of naval power by the invasion force played a key role. Lorge wrote that "the most important contest was taking place on the water. There the contest was decidedly one-sided, with the Song Navy winning every battle, usually decisively."^[9] The Jin did not completely neglect naval forces, however their attempts were little and late. As the river fleets of the Song were defeating the northern invasion force, the Song's coastal fleet under Admiral Li Bao attacked the fledgling yet numerically superior Jin fleet in its home port. "The Song navy's fire arrows made short work of the Jin fleet, annihilating the entire Jin force in a single engagement."^[10] As a result of the Song's continued naval strength the Jin Dynasty was never able to conquer the south and take control of all of China.

In 1270 the Mongols, after defeating the Jin and taking control of the north, realized that the key to defeating the Song lay in naval power. Khubilai Khan ordered the construction of a fleet of five thousand warships and the training of seventy thousand sailors and marines to man them. The Mongols elected to invade the Song with a drive down the Han River to take control of the Yangzi. With thousands of ships in the invasion force the Mongols were able to defeat the Song Navy, and Lo tells us that once again "in the great struggle between the Chinese and their enemies to the north during the Southern Song period, it was the naval phase of the wars that was the most decisive."[\[11\]](#)

Joint Operations

Much has been made in American strategy of the importance of joint operations in the goal of power projection. Chinese military forces throughout history have demonstrated this strategy. Combined and joint operations between armies and naval fleets were a hallmark of warfare in pre-modern China. Chinese navies provided the ability for armies to erect and defend river crossings, a significant geographical limitation on campaigns. Large armies were difficult to support in the field so naval forces also provided a vital logistical role, supplying the army and defending the lines of communication. Chinese fleets also provided direct combat support to armies in the field.

The examples of Chinese joint operations start with the naval architecture of Chinese warships and progress to joint campaigns in the formation and destruction of dynasties. At the lowest level, Chinese fleets were composed of numerous ships and many of them were designed specifically for joint operations between armies and naval forces. Galleys were key to most Chinese navies since the inland waters required a secondary source of power beyond sail. Ships were constructed in several classes as transports, supply vessels, and for ship-to-ship combat. One of the most telling "joint" developments in Chinese naval architecture was the creation and evolution of the "tower ship." These ships, first used in primitive form around 500 BC, were designed to assist in siege warfare. The large tower that made up part of the vessel's superstructure was intended to serve as a seaborne siege tower. The ship sailed to a fortress's walls and troops either fired at the defenders from the superstructure or assaulted the walls directly. These ships continued to develop throughout Chinese history and documentary examples of their use can be found through the fourteenth century.

One campaign in particular provides military historians with a clear example of the importance of joint warfare in Chinese military history. The Battle of Lake Poyang, which resulted in the victory necessary for the Ming Dynasty to take control of China, provides historians with an illuminating study on the Chinese use of naval forces. It illustrates the vital nature of armies and navies working in concert. This battle shows, according to historian Edward Dreyer:

The military history of this period is a story of armies being transported to sieges by fleets. The 1363 naval battle, which occurred when one fleet attempted to come to the relief of a city besieged by another, is one of the best-documented examples of this mode of warfare in Chinese history.[\[12\]](#)

As the Yuan Dynasty began to splinter in the fourteenth century the power of local warlords became greater throughout China. Along the Yangzi river three powers arose: the Han, the Ming, and the Wu. In the summer of 1363 Chen Youliang of the Han, launched a fleet downstream on the Yangzi to besiege the city of Nanchang. Nanchang, which sat on the south end of Lake Poyang and was controlled by the Ming, was the key to the Jiangxi region. With the Ming armies engaged in a battle on their southern front with the army of Wu, Chen Youliang saw an opportunity and launched his fleet with three hundred thousand soldiers, sailors, and marines aboard.[\[13\]](#)

The Han fleet sailed through the straits leading from the Yangzi to Lake Poyang and continued south to the city of Nanchang, which lay at the mouth of the Gan River. The ships were huge, the largest said to carry two to three thousand troops each.^[14] Constructed of numerous decks, watertight hatches, specific holding areas for the horses of cavalry units, and armored superstructures, these “tower ships” made up the center pieces of the fleet. Designed for power projection and joint warfare these vessels were the era’s Amphibious Assault Ships. Reaching the Kan River, the Han army launched an amphibious assault and commenced an elaborate siege of the city of Nanchang.

Edward Dreyer tells us that with the large numbers of the “tower ships” it is likely that Chen “intended to repeat the success he had achieved in 1360, capturing cities by scaling their riverine walls directly from the sterns of ships.”^[15] Chen planned, according to Dreyer, to descend on the cities on the lake and take them with an initial massive assault that would make a long siege unnecessary. However, the garrison at Nanchang proved up to the task of defending the city and a siege developed.

It was two months before the Ming expedition in the south was made aware of the siege at Nanchang. They departed from their position and headed north up the Yangzi. Dreyer tells us “from the times involved that the Ming expedition from Nanking was entirely waterborne.”^[16] Here again we see a joint force of a naval fleet with an embarked army is the dominant method of warfare. The Ming entered the straits leading to Lake Poyang and defeated the small garrison that the Han had left to defend the waterway.

Once on the lake, Zhu Yuanzhang, the commander of the Ming fleet and founder of the Ming dynasty, began joint operations. He dispatched two separate armies to take positions at the mouth and outlet of the straits, effectively closing the choke-point to other expeditions or the retreat of the Han. He also sent orders for a third army to march overland to intercept the Han if they abandoned their fleet. If the Han used their fleet to escape, the army could relieve Nanchang when the Ming fleet engaged the Han on the lake. With a portion of his land forces engaged, Zhu ordered the Ming fleet to set sail into the lake in search of the Han.

Hearing of the arrival of the Ming force, Chen left a token force to continue the siege of Nanchang. On the same day that the Ming began their drive into the lake he embarked his forces and set sail down the Gan River to re-enter Lake Poyang. With a force that was superior in both the number of troops and size and number of ships, Chen was in search of a decisive sea battle. On 15 August, 1363 the two fleets engaged one another in Lake Poyang. The large Han tower ships, with their deeper draft, were constrained by declining water levels and numerous shoals, which evened the odds for the smaller Ming fleet with their shallow draft ships. The battle raged for four days, the momentum switching between the two forces several times. Hundreds of ships were sunk on each side and thousands of casualties mounted. The huge, armored Han tower ships proved virtually unassailable on the first day of the battle, but a fire ship attack by the Ming on the second day decimated the Han fleet.^[17]

As the two fleets engaged in the Lake the overland Ming relief army swept into Nanchang and routed the Han forces that had remained. The third day of the four-day engagement was used by the two fleets to regroup. After another day of battle on the lake Zhu pulled back from the Han fleet and set sail for the Yangzi River. There he hoped to bottle up the Han and destroy them in one final battle.^[18]

The Ming use of joint warfare left the Han in a difficult position. The overland relief army had retaken Nanchang and the now reinforced garrison there blocked any attempt to escape south via the Kan River. The Ming fleet had disembarked ground forces earlier to close the straits that would allow the Han to escape north to the Yangzi. Any attempt to escape in the direction of Han territory required not only the defeat of these troops, but also another engagement with the Ming

fleet. It took over a month, with supplies dwindling and the fleet on the verge of starvation, before Chen initiated his attempt to break out of the lake.

The Han fleet successfully fought its way clear of Lake Poyang, fighting pitched battles with and defeating the garrisons on the shores of the strait. The fleet finally broke out onto the Yangzi, their only possible escape route. It was there, as they attempted to turn upstream toward home, that the Ming fleet was waiting. With the advantage of the currents on their side the Ming descended on the Han and the two engaged in a fierce sea battle, ships locked together with crews grappling and the vessels being carried downstream by the current. A Ming reserve squadron from downstream joined the fight and as the Han ships struggled to break away Chen himself was killed by an arrow.[19]

Several Han ships managed to escape upstream but hundreds surrendered or were destroyed. The Ming took dozens of warships intact, including the weapons and horses aboard, thus strengthening both their sea and land forces. The death of Chen provided Zhu with the decisive victory he needed. With his now reinforced fleet and victorious land forces he was on the path toward conquering the rest of the China. By 1368 he had subjugated the Han and the Wu, continued to force the remnants of the Mongol Yuan back toward the steppes of Central Asia, and established the Ming Dynasty which would last almost three centuries.

China as Superpower

In the fifteenth century the Chinese put to sea a fleet larger and more powerful than anything the world had ever seen. For thirty years this fleet patrolled the oceans of Asia, cruising as far as the Arabian Gulf and the east coast of Africa. The fleet and the voyages, as described by China historian Edward Dreyer, “were undertaken to force the states of Southeast Asia and the Indian Ocean to acknowledge the power and the majesty of Ming China and its Emperor.”[20] The voyages, seven in total, commanded by the imperial eunuch Zheng He, were meant as part diplomatic mission, part trade mission, and part military force. This idea, of forward deploying a naval fleet in order to impact the world through peaceful diplomacy as well as the use of military force, has been a central part of the modern strategy of the United States Navy. In the 1997 Naval Operational Concept paper *Forward... From the Sea: The Navy Operational Concept*, Chief of Naval Operations Admiral Jay Johnson wrote that “The primary purpose of forward-deployed naval forces is to project American power from the sea to influence events ashore in the littoral regions of the world across the operational spectrum of peace, crisis, and war. This is what we do.”[21] This sounds like a mission statement for the Treasure Fleets of Zheng He as much as it does a formulation of modern American naval strategy.

In 1403, after violently taking the throne from his nephew, the Ming emperor Yongle ordered the construction of a large sea going fleet. The motivations behind the massive naval project have been debated. Some historians point to stories that the deposed nephew had escaped across the sea while others simply say it was in order to expand the Chinese system of international relations known as the “tributary system.” The fleet was completed by 1405. It was centered on the “treasure ships” that were constructed in a grand shipyard, complete with dry-docks, on the Qinhuai River near the capital of Nanjing. Sixty-two of the “treasure ships” were built as part of a fleet of 255 vessels with over 27,000 soldiers, sailors, and marines.[22]

The “treasure ships” were the height of naval science in the fifteenth century. Using technologies like watertight bulkheads and balanced lug sails they were far in advance of European ship design and were “the largest wooden ships ever seen in the world.”[23] At 440 feet long, 180 feet wide, and rigged with nine masts, they dwarfed the ships of European “explorers” that would enter their cruising grounds a century later. The size of the Ming fleet, which would come to be known as the Foreign Expeditionary Armada, was on par with the Spanish Armada of 1588, or

the combined English, Spanish and French forces that met at the Battle of Trafalgar 400 years after the launch of the Chinese fleet.[\[24\]](#)

The Ming fleet was deployed in its first of seven long cruises in July of 1405. This deployment included travel as far as the west coast of India. During the voyage Zheng He and the ambassadors that accompanied him received tribute from numerous states and kingdoms, many sending envoys to return with the fleet to China so they could pay homage to the Ming court. This would set the standard for the vast majority of the fleet's operations. Peaceful diplomacy, trade missions, and operations to "show the flag" were all that was required of the fleet during most of their deployments. Port calls and diplomatic missions were conducted throughout the Indian Ocean, including stops in Hormuz, Aden, and Calicut, all of which were regional or trade powers. Dreyer writes in his biography of Zheng He that the fleet "was frightening enough that it seldom needed to fight, but being able to fight was its primary mission."[\[25\]](#)

The return leg of the first voyage offered the fleet its first challenge to the military power of Ming China. The Sumatran port of Palembang, a key jumping off point for crossings through the Straits of Malacca, had fallen under control of the pirate and smuggler Chen Zuyi. Chen realized that the Ming fleet, if it made repeated patrols through the region, would become a threat to his power as it enforced open passage for merchant vessels. The battle that resulted as the pirates attempted to escape the Ming fleet was described in the contemporary Chinese history the *Taizong Shilu*, which recounts that "Chen Zuyi was heavily defeated. Over five thousand of the pirate gang were killed, ten pirate ships destroyed by burning, and seven were captured, along with two forged seals made of copper."[\[26\]](#) Dreyer suggests that the battle most likely took place in the bays, rivers, and mangrove swamps surrounding Palembang. While the large vessels of the fleet blocked escape, smaller riverine vessels and disembarked troops fought the pirates in the littorals.[\[27\]](#)

The maiden voyage of the Foreign Expeditionary Armada was not the only one that included power projection through military operations. On the third voyage, between 1410 and 1411, the Ming fleet landed at Ceylon after the long open water crossing of the Indian Ocean. They had received an unfriendly reception from the local rulers there on their first voyage and returned on the third to establish the superiority of the Ming Empire. The Chinese launched an amphibious assault with over two thousand troops, led by Zheng He himself. The landing force was separated from the fleet and the Sinhalese, who had a force reported at 50,000 troops, launched an attack against the anchored ships. While the fleet easily defended itself against the attackers, Zheng He led the landing force against the capital, taking the city, the King, and the entire ruling leadership. These leaders were returned to the Ming court as prisoners and replaced by a ruling family sympathetic and loyal to the Ming Emperor.[\[28\]](#)

The fourth voyage included the use of force when the fleet landed on Sumatra during their return leg. A contender to the local throne had initiated a rebellion against the King of Semudera, the ruler who had paid tribute to and been recognized by the Ming Court. In support of their ally the Ming landed troops and launched operations against the rebels. Commanding both his own marines and local allied troops, Zheng He defeated and captured the rebel leader. He, and a fresh tribute mission from the allied King, returned to the Ming Court at the end of the voyage.

The Foreign Expeditionary Armada of Ming China fulfilled missions that modern strategists would label forward presence, joint operations, and power projection. Through their trade missions they helped to build coalitions and reassured friends. Through the transport of tributary envoys they enhanced diplomatic contacts. When the time came they were ready for combat action in support of their allies, to demonstrate the power and resolve of the Ming Empire. The forces under Zheng He were prepared for battle as well as flexing their military muscle as a deterrent. Once again we see that Chinese naval history provides compelling examples of their use of strategies that the United States feels are vital to naval operations in the twenty-first century. "These spectacular voyages," according to historian Bruce Swanson, "in fact, proved that China was the supreme

world seapower whose shipbuilding techniques and navigational abilities were unmatched by any other nation.”^[29]

Differing Traditions

From the study of China’s naval heritage we see that the modern concepts of power projection, forward presence, and dominance of the littorals are not new to world naval history. The Chinese have been conducting these kinds of missions for centuries. Through their long tradition of riverine operations and warfare on inland waters, as well as costal operations, they have demonstrated throughout their past a mastery of the littorals. It should not surprise us that modern Chinese naval history includes numerous examples of coastal operations. The conflict with Vietnam over the Paracel Islands in 1974 and the numerous clashes involving the Spratly Islands in the 1980s and 1990s all had echoes of China’s past focus on coastal warfare. The maritime strategy of modern China, labeled as “Offshore Defense,” has all the hallmarks of their long tradition of coastal and littoral warfare.^[30]

The Lake Poyang Campaign that played a critical role in the founding of the Ming Dynasty provides an illustrative case study of pre-modern Chinese use of joint operations. The Ming Foreign Expeditionary Armada, or Treasure Fleet, of the fifteenth century was the world’s first example of forward presence operations. The history of the voyages commanded by Zheng He provide examples of all of the key elements of modern American strategy, forward presence across East Asia and the Indian Ocean, mastery of the littoral regions, and examples of joint operations. It should not be forgotten that the Ming fleet was the largest and most powerful that the world had seen. The missions included peaceful elements but also demonstrated examples of amphibious assault, coalition counter-insurgency operations, and unilateral regime change.

The People’s Liberation Army Navy (PLAN) of the People’s Republic of China has begun to make tentative steps toward returning to the world’s oceans. In 1997 the Chinese deployed multiple task groups made up of surface combatants and logistical support ships to Southeast Asia, and North, Central, and South America. Historian Bernard Cole has written that “This significant accomplishment was the widest ranging Chinese naval deployment since the voyages of Zheng He.”^[31] Development of the Pakistani port facility in Gwadar on the Arabian Sea has been completed with eighty percent of its funding coming from China.^[32] It is not a stretch of the imagination to consider future forward basing there by PLAN forces. Chinese naval leaders have pointed to the voyages of Zheng He as an example of their future strategic plans. While they emphasize the exploration, diplomacy, and trade elements of the fleet’s mission it is vital that Western leaders understand that the Foreign Expeditionary Armada was capable of much more. Reliance on Chinese propagandistic explanations of the Ming Fleet places American strategists in a questionable position at best. The PLAN is looking toward a future which will bring American and Chinese surface groups into much closer contact not just in East Asia, but around the globe.

The Chinese experience in naval warfare is also important to strategists because it provides a unique and different view of naval power from traditional Western analysis. A focus on Western ideals and Mahanian strategy closes off important counterpoints in the study of naval history. China, with its history of naval operations on inland waters and the centrality of joint operations between armies and navies, can provide historians and strategists with an alternate framework to structure their study in the future. Chinese naval architecture, traditionally focused on vessels of shallower draft, with lower length to beam ratios and innovative design elements, is just one example of the differences in the Eastern and Western naval paradigms. Further study of these differences can help increase future understanding of naval power.

As the United States and the West continue to develop their strategic view of the twenty-first century it is important to look at the martial history of China. As international terrorism and conflict with state based regional threats continue to occupy American foreign policy and military strategy,

planners still need to be on the lookout for other potential threats. China, with a growing military and economic presence throughout the world, continues to be a potential opponent to U.S. policy and strategy. A proper understanding of the military history of China, particularly her often misrepresented naval history, is vital to the success of any future strategic planning.

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